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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [MOPS](#) [GG](#)
SUBJECT: GEORGIA BOMBING UPDATE

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Mark X. Perry for reasons 1.4(b&d).

Summary

1. (C) Georgian officials report that SU-type airplanes from Russia crossed into Georgian airspace on the evening of August 6, and that one of the planes dropped a "precision-guided Russian missile" -- estimated to weigh 700-1,000 kilograms -- that impacted near the Georgian village Tsitelubani, close to the city of Gori. The bomb did not explode, and the bulk of it is currently lodged in the ground at the impact site. Georgian officials have made a concerted effort to be transparent with us and the rest of the international community -- even inviting the diplomatic corps to visit the scene August 7. They argue that the lack of international condemnation against Russia for previous incidents -- including the March 11 bombing in the Upper Kodori Gorge -- has encouraged Russian adventurism, and they are pushing for a more forceful international response this time. End Summary.

Collecting Evidence, and Identifying Motive

2. (C) Georgian officials informed Embassy the night of the attack, and Embassy officers have seen the impact site and missile remains with Russian markings. First Deputy Foreign Minister Nikoloz Vashakidze briefed the diplomatic corps August 7, saying that eyewitnesses, radar records, and the missile itself confirm that the planes crossed from Russia a bit before 1830 local time and released the missile near the end of a 20-30 minute operation. He noted that the impact site was about 80 kilometers south of the Russian-Georgian border, and about 60 kilometers west of Tbilisi. Commenting on the likely motive for the attack, Vashakidze suggested two explanations: first, he noted that the Georgian initiative aimed at "peaceful settlement of the South Ossetia conflict" via the creation of a temporary autonomous unit and a commission to define the entity's autonomous status, was going well, and that Russia "perhaps does not appreciate" this process and was attempting to stop it. Second, he stressed that the international community had not sufficiently addressed the March 11 attack in the Upper Kodori Gorge, and this had encouraged the Russians to "repeat" such an attack, this time at an even "more dangerous level." He said the bombing was in some sense a "testing" of Georgia and the international community, and that it would be important to react strongly enough to prevent other such dangerous situations in the future.

3. (C) According to radar records that the Georgians shared with Embassy DAO, there were three penetrations of Georgian airspace near Kazbegi. The first was a shallow incursion. The second and third incursions followed similar tracks from Kazbegi into the separatist region of South Ossetia and back. The data on the third incursion reveals two aircraft during the turn. It is possible that all three incursions were by two aircraft, and possibly by the same two aircraft. The

speed and maneuverability of the aircraft indicate that they were most likely SU 24s, although it is possible they were SU 27s or 29s. Ministry of Internal Affairs officials have told us that the South Ossetians fired a Strela missile at the departing aircraft, but Vashakidze did not mention this in his briefing. South Ossetian officials have been quoted claiming the incident was a Georgian attack.

¶4. (C) The impact site is in a Georgian-controlled area just south of the former South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast, and just north of the main highway from Tbilisi to western Georgia. OSCE officials confirmed to us that the site is inside the area generally called the "zone of conflict" (more precisely called the Area of Responsibility of the Joint Peacekeeping Force, or JPKF) and because of this OSCE monitors and JPKF forces had been able to visit the scene. The OSCE Mission is currently awaiting the monitors' report. According to OSCE, this area has generally not been known for ethnic tensions or the kind of shooting incidents that have regularly occurred closer to Tskhinvali. The Georgians believe that the intended target might have been a mobile radar station located 125 meters away from the impact site.

A Measured Georgian Response

¶5. (C) President Saakashvili was returning from Europe when the incident occurred and he convened a cabinet meeting upon arrival to coordinate the Georgian reaction. In the hours after the attack Charge urged Foreign Minister Bezhuashvili and other Georgian officials to continue the moderate tone and measured responses they have taken thus far, in order to allow the incident to speak for itself. Bezhuashvili assured Charge that Georgia was planning no retaliatory or aggressive responses but would ensure that the incident received the

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public and international attention it deserved. He said there was growing frustration and concern in the Georgian leadership about Russian intentions following the March 11 attack by Russian helicopters in Kodori, and the Georgians believe the weak international response to such incidents in the past has encouraged the Russians to launch further incidents.

Comment

¶6. (C) The Georgians have assured us they understand the need to respond calmly to this incident, and they have quickly mobilized to get information out to the international community. They clearly hope that an investigation of this incident will assign blame more squarely on Russia than did the investigation of the March 11 attack, so that it might serve as a deterrent to future such incidents which could (especially if they produce fatalities) cause strong domestic political pressure for a more vigorous Georgian response. Georgian officials have told us in the past that they believe Russia provokes periodic confrontations in order to make Georgia seem less stable, and therefore make western European countries less inclined to support Georgia's NATO aspirations. Because Russia is a larger and more influential country, the Georgians argue, Russia can provoke an incident with Georgia and -- even when Russian responsibility is clear, as with March 11 -- the European reaction is to call on Georgia to make more concessions. In responding to this incident, our approach should be aimed at preventing this dynamic from repeating itself; attacking Georgia militarily should not be allowed to slow or block Georgia's NATO integration.

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